

Artists Andrew Hewitt and Melanie Jordan, in conversation with Ian Banks, Public Art & Architecture Officer at North West Arts Board.

1. What approach have you taken to your Year of the Artist residency at Congleton Borough Council, and why do you choose to work within a residency context?

MJ: The (YOTA) residency was part of the 'Activate' project that aims to advocate the role of visual arts especially public and community arts within redevelopment and regeneration projects in the Borough.

Our recent collaborative projects have been residencies or projects which allow us time to make work in a public context. We think they offer the most exciting and challenging context in which to work. We are interested in the political and social aspects of placing work or making actions within a public or communal space.

Within this context art can be a catalyst for social dialogue, a non-commercial activity that can engage with people or a community. Public or community art is considered the poor relation of the art world but we find working with a non-art audience to be the most rewarding context in which to work.

AH: Working within local government was a new challenge for us, particularly to learn about the planning process. During our research we met with planning officers to discuss the regeneration schemes and their roles in this complex process.

We discussed with them the skills artists can bring to the process be it conceptual, visual or practical experience. Commonly held perceptions of artists are that we are impractical and an expensive luxury. By meeting an artist, often for the first time, we wanted to demonstrate to officers that these stereotypes do not stand up.

2. You have chosen to do three projects, can you expand on what the outcomes are likely to be (and what measure of control do you have over their future direction once YOTA ends)?

MJ: Consultation became a crucial and recurring issue during the research.

We decided to make a temporary work to

communicate directly with people in Sandbach the changes to the town through a HERS scheme, a major redevelopment of the former ERF truck factory and the results of a traffic management study of the high street. The work 'Go-Betweens' takes information from the councils publications (all available but not always read) and places it directly on the site where the changes will be implemented. Across the pavements of Sandbach chalk texts and diagrams will mark areas in which grant aid or redevelopment will occur. Our intention was to fully communicate the changes in the most direct way.

AH: To support the 'Go-Betweens' action we devised an exhibition to discuss the regeneration programme and to show information on how the arts can be effective within a planning strategy. The exhibition will take place in the Literary Institute, a High Victorian building by Sir Gilbert Scott which is also due to be redeveloped. The building is one of Sandbach's finest but is under-used. By opening it to the public as part of National Architecture Week we again wished to include the community in the future plans for this building as it has the potential to become a new community or cultural centre.

The 'Here' broadsheet was the culmination of our research project and contains issues and contributions from people we had contact with. We wanted to document the project and to disseminate our experience with the residents of Sandbach, planners from other local authorities and anyone interested in public and community arts.

MJ: We met with officers involved in each proposed project from Congleton's traffic hub to Roman Middlewich. After each meeting we made a report outlining ways to approach future art projects. Our broad research will form the basis of project briefs and will enable selected artists or makers to work in an informed way. When our YOTA is complete the Arts development Officer will continue to steer the project.

We hope our advocacy has helped in building an awareness, understanding and appreciation of art and artists.

AH: Congleton has few venues for the arts therefore it seems appropriate that art can be

developed here outside of the usual gallery context. The Activate project could establish an exciting and long-standing strategy for commissioning art within the planning process and a willingness and openness to the process by planning officers and public alike. The coming year should see a number of briefs set up for projects across the Borough.

3. What role do you see for artists in public art, architecture and regeneration and what role do business and community participation have to play in this process?

MJ: I think the role of artists working in Public Art contexts has changed. Nowadays there are more artists choosing to work outside the studio and gallery and who wish to use the street as the subject and the venue.

AH: Redevelopment projects bring many opportunities to an area or community. Some areas will not see any funding again for some time so it was our belief that consultation was crucial to encourage as much public involvement in the process as was possible. Arts projects can be effective in engaging the community in the issues of ownership to make regeneration sustainable. Through collaboration and consultation Artist and makers can make work or actions that inspire, are imaginative and provide a vehicle for debate. By working across the community to include businesses, community groups and the local authority, artists can make new links which can be the beginning of long term collaborations which will be of benefit long after regeneration funding has gone.

Art can be misused by planners and developers to the detriment of the artist involved and the community who are in receipt of the work. The 'branding' of towns or culture being imposed on communities is a non democratic act and most often done by groups or bodies who will not live next door to the results. Art and urban design can give a distinct identity to a place but has more value if it is owned by the community through a process of consultation and active involvement.

4 The YOTA motto is 'Breaking the Barriers' quote : what barriers do you think have been broken (and by which parties) and who has benefited overall?

MJ: I am not sure if we have 'broken any barriers' perhaps we have removed a few hurdles. It is unusual but not the first time that artists have had a residency within a planning department of local government. As a result our practice has benefited from this experience and we now know a great deal more about planning and council departments than before. We hope our presence has helped to advocate art practice amongst planners and that there will be some new art projects emerging in the Borough in the very near future.

With our temporary work in Sandbach we have focused on the need for consultation and hope this will have in some way further informed and included residents in the future of their area.

Ian Banks Art & Architecture

Public art in its purest sense encompasses all the art forms, including the visual arts and photography, performance, music, video, literature and new media. It is a body of work that is also increasingly overlapping into the established professional disciplines of architecture, urban design and also community regeneration & participation.

Public art is capable of transforming areas and creating distinctive buildings and public spaces and thereby enhancing the quality of life of people living and working there. The community benefits of public art include: making art more accessible; fostering increased knowledge and understanding of contemporary art; and in some instances, providing opportunities for people to become involved in shaping their environment. Furthermore, investment and tourism are more likely to be attracted

to an area with a distinctive and vibrant image, which may increase employment opportunities and local cultural activity.

The only parameter that public art sets within these fields are that projects, or events must be publicly accessible and site specific, designed for a particular place at a particular time. Projects may be permanently or temporarily sited and sites can include interiors of buildings, the spaces around them, parks and waterways as well as the rural environment.

The work of artists in conjunction with other urban design professionals is increasingly seen as one of the most important elements in the whole regeneration process. In some instances this collaboration does not necessarily result in an actual work of art.

Increasingly, artists are working alongside architects, landscape architects and engineers as design team members, contributing their conceptual and practical skills to the creation of buildings, public space or a particular design 'philosophy'.

In a similar manner this spirit of collaboration is hoped to invoke in all participants (professional and public alike) the sense that as a state of mind, we can all be considered artists to a degree and can all contribute ideas.

The best of contemporary art invites us to think in new ways about the world and our relationship to it. This is one of the central purposes of art. We must, therefore, acknowledge that sometimes art will be beautiful and revelatory, sometimes challenging or disturbing, sometimes ambiguous and contradictory: it is our belief at North West Arts Board that all forms should be welcome.

North West Arts Board

North West Arts Board is the regional arts development agency for Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Merseyside, the High Peaks and the unitary authorities of Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool, Halton and Warrington. The board works to support and develop the arts in the region through a series of funding, advice, information and other services and by partnering with a range of regional strategic organisations. It has offices in both Manchester and Liverpool.

NWAB 'Public Art and Architecture' Officer

Working closely alongside the NW Regional Development Agency, RIBA NW and all regional Local Authorities, the officer post was specifically created to assist in the raising of quality and profile of north-west public art and architecture through promotion of high quality design in the landscape and built environment.

Ian Banks practiced as a chartered architect from 1990. An interest and background in architect-artist collaboration brought him to NWAB to begin work in October 2000.

In carrying out these works, he and NWAB endorse the City Pride Partnership approach to public art. They support the early engagement of artists and architects of regional, national and international standing as part of collaborative design teams. In turn, they will assist in helping provide appropriate guidance and opportunities for artists, architects and other creative partners and businesses interested in working together with communities.